

Testimony of:

Dr. Frank Luntz
President

Luntz Research Companies
120 S. Payne Street
Alexandria, Virginia 22314

To:

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Water Resources and Environment
US House of Representatives
2165 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington DC 20515

June 8, 2005

Good Morning. My name is Dr. Frank Luntz, and I am the President of the Luntz Research Companies, a public affairs communication firm based in Alexandria, Virginia. I am here today to convey to you Americans' strong, bi-partisan, multi-regional support for investing in America's water infrastructure.

Earlier this year my organization, in partnership with the highly respected Democrat polling firm Penn, Schoen and Berland, conducted a nationwide telephone opinion poll that found nearly nine in ten Americans support creating a federal trust fund to guarantee federal investment in clean and safe water. Fully 86% of adult Americans backed the concept—a public opinion consensus rarely seen in America today.

There are several findings of our findings that deserve attention. First, clean water is seen as a higher priority and a more important principle than the investments made in the more high profile areas of transportation and airways. Fully 91% believe that *"if, as a country, we are willing to invest over \$30 billion a year on highways and more than \$8 billion a year on our airways, we certainly should be willing to make the necessary investments in our lakes, rivers and oceans."* And when asked to prioritize, 71% choose investing in clean and safe water, compared to just 20% who choose roads and highways, and 3% who choose airports and aviation.

And more than two thirds of Americans would rather the federal government invest in our water infrastructure than introduce new tax cuts. The reason for this overwhelming support and clearly articulated prioritization can be explained in three words: QUALITY OF LIFE. Clean water affects everyone and it matters to everyone in their day-to-day life.

It doesn't matter if you are a Republican or a Democrat. It doesn't matter if you come from a red state or blue. An overwhelming majority of Americans believe that investing in America's water infrastructure is a responsibility of the Federal Government here in Washington.

Now it's hard for me to believe but I have been a professional pollster for almost 20 years and I can tell you from personal experience that such an overwhelming consensus about the role of Washington doesn't happen often – but it exists here. The reason why Americans so overwhelmingly believe that investing in providing a clean water infrastructure is a national issue requiring federal funding is because they believe keeping water clean and safe cannot be confined to any one locality or, in their words, *"clean water has no boundaries."*

Fully 71% of Americans agree with the statement *"Clean and safe water is a national issue that requires dedicated national funding. As a matter of principle, the federal government should become a true partner with states and localities and pay for the necessary sewage and wastewater treatment systems to guarantee clean and safe water for future generations of Americans."*

By comparison, only 23% agree with the statement: *"Clean and safe water is a local problem that requires a local solution. The federal government is already running a \$500 billion dollar deficit. Clean and safe water is important, but the federal government just can't afford to spend any more money. Local communities need to step up and pay."* We raised the specter of the federal deficit, yet it did not move people to oppose federal funding. Clean water and effective wastewater treatment is such a high priority that not even the federal deficit can dampen public insistence in a funding role by Washington.

This consensus goes beyond perception and straight into fact. For example, when told that the fact that the federal government today pays just 5% of the costs of ensuring that our water is clean and safe, four-out-of-five Americans (79%) say this is unfair and unacceptable.

In my years as a pollster, I have heard politicians complain that voters say a particular program is important to them but only when someone else pays for it. New taxes of any kind are never an easy sell...except when it deals with clean water. Four times as many Americans believe there should be *"a dedicated funding source to ensure clean and safe water for future generations"* (73%) as those who believe our water infrastructure *"should not receive federal funding but should continue to be funded as it is today."* (18%). And more than 80% are willing to open their wallets and pay more in taxes because clean water is a priority to them.

Americans are sending their lawmakers a clear message: protect our nation's water or risk getting left behind by the voters. Nearly eight in ten voters (78%) describe themselves as more likely to vote for their Member of Congress if they learned he or she supported establishing a trust fund for water infrastructure. And almost two thirds of voters (63%) describe themselves as less likely to vote for their member if they learned he or she opposed the trust fund.

And for Members of this Committee, only final result to ponder as you ponder what to do. Fully 85% say that if there was a bill in Congress to create a long-term, sustainable and reliable trust fund to protect and guarantee clean and safe water, they would support it. 85%! When is the last time you seen public opinion so unified?

Let me be blunt: this issue is not going to go away. It is not simply an environmental issue. It is not simply a health issue. Clean water and wastewater management is very personal to voters because it impacts Americans every single day of the year. This is not a local issue because water has no local boundaries. This is one of those areas — and there aren't many — where Americans *demand* that Washington take responsibility.

My Democratic colleague, Doug Schoen, of Penn Schoen & Berland Associates concurs with me in this interpretation of such overwhelming public support for federal investment in America's water infrastructure. "Environmental issues writ large can sometimes be divisive," he says "but clean and safe water is not seen by voters as a divisive issue. Instead, there is overwhelming support from both political parties for what is seen as a basic need that has to be protected — clean and safe water for our generation and for our children's."

I couldn't agree more.

###